

# Attorney's background in forefront as he prepares to defend ex-officer

By Todd Bensman

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Drug dealers once disliked Frank Perez so much that they put out a \$25,000 contract on his life and firebombed his home.

That was when he was one of the Dallas Police Department's most decorated, prolific undercover narcotics officers and the bane of Dallas' illegal drug industry during the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s.

Now, accused drug dealers who might once have fled Mr. Perez come to him for salvation. Since he quit the department in 1993 and then became a criminal defense attorney, he said, he seems to attract drug

cases because he knows every undercover police trick invented — and how to unravel any case that wasn't made strictly by the book.

His unique background helped catapult Mr. Perez into the spotlight caused by the bizarre case of Johnnie Hernandez, the former Dallas police officer accused of trying to arrange the death of Dallas Cowboys All-Pro receiver Michael Irvin.

As Mr. Perez helps defend Mr. Hernandez, he will look for any procedural hole in the prosecution's case, which depends heavily on information developed through an undercover sting.

The irony of his new role is not lost on

Mr. Perez, who as a target himself not so long ago knows something about murder-for-hire plots.

"I'm just going to tear it apart and make sure they did everything right," he said. "I know what the proper procedures are, and I don't think they followed the proper procedures.

"I like Johnnie. I like Johnnie a lot, and I really want to help him."

The prosecutor on the Hernandez case, Assistant District Attorney Toby Shook, said his adversary's background will make for an interesting case.

"I'm sure Frank will bring all his experience to bear on this," Mr. Shook said.

"That worries me, but then I worry about every lawyer I go up against."

Mr. Perez and Mr. Hernandez were Police Department colleagues a few years before their law enforcement careers took dramatically different courses and then converged again. They even worked a part-time job together briefly.

Mr. Hernandez's police career abruptly ended with his resignation June 27 after his arrest on charges of solicitation of capital murder and bribery. Authorities allege that he paid an undercover federal officer posing as a hit man \$2,960 as a down payment toward Mr. Irvin's death.

Mr. Hernandez's attorneys have argued

that police entrapped him and that he had tried to back out of the deal. He was released on bond July 16, and he is scheduled for an Aug. 5 trial.

Mr. Perez, a 1993 Southern Methodist University Law School graduate, had practiced law in relative obscurity until the day in June when topless dancer Rachelle Smith came to his office with her longtime boyfriend, then-Officer Hernandez.

Ms. Smith, a key witness in Mr. Irvin's cocaine-possession trial, said the football star had threatened her with physical harm if she testified against him, Mr. Pe-  
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